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Romans 2:1-16

Fourth Message

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# GOD'S CASE AGAINST THE MORAL MAN

Recently our political leaders have begun to face increased ethical scrutiny when they run for office. Even though our society openly confesses that we no longer believe in moral absolutes for ourselves, when it comes to national leaders, we demand such high ideals that we eliminate practically everyone. The same double standard can be seen in interpersonal relationships.

How people define sin is determined by whether they are the victims or the perpetrators. For example, if someone has an affair with a man's wife, the husband calls it what it is—adultery. But if he has the affair, then the same action is called a meaningful, personal relationship. If a man is the victim of someone's angry outburst at work, he calls it malice, bitterness or revenge. But if he explodes, he says, "I was just being vulnerable and honest about my feelings."

The human heart has the capacity to tolerate perverse evil within itself while harshly condemning even the smallest offense in others. Jesus understood this tendency. This is why he said, "First remove the log in your own eye, then take out the splinter in your brother's eye." He saw this comparison as one of tragic proportions. Paul also understood this about the human heart and addresses this theme in Romans 2.

Before Paul can speak about the righteousness of faith revealed in the gospel, he has to expose man's need for the gospel. Therefore, he speaks about the judgment and wrath of God with regard to man's sin. In the last chapter, we saw how pagan humanity faces God's holy throne because of their high-handed idolatry and perverse sexuality. As the recipients of the wrath of God in this life, they are given over to the perverse idols of their own making.

But Paul knew that many of his readers would consider themselves exempt from this message, for they did not believe in idolatry or moral perversity. Because they pursued high ethical standards, they saw themselves as moral men. What does the gospel have to say to these people?

In Romans 2, the moral man is the defendant. This passage reads like a courtroom drama as Paul names him, gives the indictment against him, announces the verdict, and passes sentence. In verse 1, he identifies the defendant.

## I. The Defendant: The Moral Man (2:1a)

**Therefore you are without excuse, every man of you who passes judgment. (NASB)**

There was another side to the pagan world of Paul's day other than that portrayed in chapter 1. This was the world of the Greek philosophers. In fact, one of Paul's illustrious contemporaries was Seneca, a stoic moralist who tutored Nero. Because Seneca loved the good life and wrote about it so effectively, Christian writers later wanted to call him "Seneca, one of our own." One commentator said that he not only exalted great moral virtues, he also exposed hypocrisy. In his role as a moral guide, he preached the equality of all human beings and acknowledged the pervasive character of evil. He

even practiced daily self-examination and ridiculed contemporary idolatry (F.F. Bruce). Seneca is representative of the defendant Paul is addressing in chapter 2.

Can you take the stand with the defendant as a moral man or woman who passes judgment on the rest of society? To help you to examine yourself, I want to ask you four questions. If you can say yes to any of these questions, then you must endure Paul's cross-examination.

1. Do you see yourself as immune to idolatry and moral perversity?
2. Do you classify society into two groups of people—"us" and "them"?
3. Do you see yourself as incapable of committing the heinous sins for which you criticize others?
4. Do you lack empathy for the enslaved degenerates of our world?

If you answered yes to any one of these, you are a moralist.

What does Paul have to say to you? Like any good district attorney, he first points out the indictment.

## II. The Indictment by the Prosecution (2:1-5)

**Therefore you are without excuse, every man of you who passes judgment, for in that you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. And we know that the judgment of God rightly fall upon those who practice such things. And do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment upon those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.**

Being the prosecuting attorney, Paul begins by pointing out the three facts of the case. He first tells the moralist, "When you judge others, you are admitting that there is an absolute moral standard in life." Our society confesses to having no absolutes, yet we continue to judge ourselves and others. We are the most libelous country on earth. But no man can judge without an absolute.

This is the opening argument of C. S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*. He begins by quoting statements people make when they have been wronged:

"How'd you like it if anyone did the same to you?"—"That's my seat, I was there first"—"Leave him alone, he isn't doing you any harm"—"Why should you shove in first?"—"Give me a bit of your orange, I gave you a bit of mine"—"Come on, you promised."

Lewis continues:

What interests me about all these remarks is that the man who makes them is not merely saying that the other man's behavior does not happen to please him. He is appealing to some kind of standard of behavior which he expects the other man to know about. And the other man very seldom replies: "To hell with your standard." Nearly always he tries to make out that what he has been doing does not really go against the standard, or if that it does there is some special excuse.

In judging others, the moral man is admitting that there is a standard, a moral absolute.

The second fact Paul emphasizes is that God judges according to that standard. He says, "The judgment of God is according to the truth." The standard that man acknowledges is the standard which God created.

Third, Paul says, "You too have violated that standard." Seneca is an example of this, for he often tolerated vices in himself similar to those which he condemned in others. When his student Nero murdered his mother Agrippina, Seneca said nothing. This was passive compliance and the equivalent to murder! In our own day, political leaders are reluctant to run for office because they know they have violated the same standards of behavior for which they have publicly criticized others. They do not want to come under the scrutiny of those they have criticized.

After presenting these facts, Paul then discusses the faulty logic of the moralist in verse 3. He says, "Do you suppose that you will escape God's judgment when you pass judgment on others and practice the same thing yourself? Do you think lightly of the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?" The moralist realizes that when he violates the standards, God does not bring immediate retribution. Instead, in his kindness, God does not deal with him according to his sin. Because God does not deal with him immediately, the moralist concludes that he must tolerate the sin. Therefore, why change? Thus, with an unrepentant heart, he continues to condemn others for the same thing.

Paul says, "You logic is faulty, for you confuse God's forbearance and patience for tolerance." The kindness of God, not the judgment, is bestowed in order to lead men to repentance. We are to respond to God's grace and patience with repentance. But the moral man will not do this.

Because of this, I think he is worse off than the immoral man. The immoral man has hope, for he may come to his senses from experiencing the wrath of God and the enslavement of his condition. But the moral man sits in his complacency and does not change. This is tragic! The indictment against him is that he despises God's forbearance and kindness toward him.

Now comes the verdict which Paul presents in an interesting manner in verse 1.

### III. The Verdict: Guilty! (2:1b)

**...you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things.**

The moralist will take the stand before the judgment seat of Christ, and his own voice will announce the verdict. No witnesses are needed—not even a word from God or Scripture. No angelic testimony is brought forth. God will simply play a video of the moralist's life in word and deed, and the dialogue will come from his own judgment of others. His speech will correspond to the times when he practiced the very things he condemned in others. Perhaps, someone

cut him off on the freeway once, and he damned that person in a curse. The scene in the video will be of him cutting someone else off while his own words damn him.

This scares the hell out of me! It is terrifying to think that our lives played out with our own words will condemn us. We condemn ourselves. The verdict: we are guilty with regard to our own standards.

Paul took us from the indictment to the verdict of guilt. Now we come to the sentence in verses 5-16.

### IV. The Sentence: God's Wrath in Judgment (2:5-16)

**But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God...**

In each of these three court cases concerning the immoral man, the moral man, and the religious man, Paul uses different reasoning to cause them to see their need for the gospel. With the immoral man, Paul used the argument that the wrath of God is revealed in this life as he is given over to the perverted choices of his own making. But that is not the argument he uses with the moral man.

Instead of talking about the wrath of God in this life, Paul now focuses on the wrath of God in the final judgment. Paul uses this reasoning because the moral man sees himself as exempt from God's wrath. On an external basis, he does appear better than the immoral man. Thus, he thinks that he can be accepted before God in his own robes of righteousness. To convince him of his need, Paul brings the moralist before the righteous judgment of God. If you are a moralist, you need to see your life on the basis of God's future judgment.

The rest of the text reveals how this judgment will be meted out. The first quality, given in verses 6-10, is God's judgment is according to our works:

**...who will render to every man according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek, but glory and honor and peace to every man who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.**

This may come as a surprise to you, but the universal teaching of Scripture, from the prophets to Jesus and Paul, is that God's judgment is according to our works. Jeremiah said in 17:10, "I the Lord search the heart, I test the mind, even to give to each man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds." Then Jesus said in Matthew 16:27, "For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father and with His angels; and will recompense every man according to his deeds." Paul, writing to Christians in 2 Corinthians 5:10, says, "For we must all appear before the judgment-seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad."

I have heard it taught that there are two judgment-seats, one for believers and one for non-believers. But there is only one. Although salvation comes by grace and faith, our judgment is according to our works. But only those who have been saved by faith and have brought forth the life of Christ by grace will have any works worthy of being saved. Since judgment is according to our works, we need to see ourselves in that heavenly courtroom.

Paul discusses three aspects of this judgment. He says God examines our motives, looks at our deeds, and gives a reward. This can be

better understood with a visual aid borrowed from the ancient Near East. Imagine living in Jerusalem and planning to travel to Jericho. You first must choose the gate by which you will exit the walled city. This gate is equivalent to our motives. All works begin with motives. The gate then opens onto a road. This is the deed itself, whether good or evil. Then the road leads to a destination: in this case either heaven or hell. There is no third alternative.

Paul lists our possible motives in verse 8. The motivation for evil deeds is selfish ambition. The motives for good deeds are glory, honor and immortality. The stock market's volatile behavior from this past week is a good illustration of motives. My economist (the owner of a local restaurant) said, "It is really quite simple. A bull market is motivated by greed, and a bear market is motivated by fear!" I think he stated it well.

Paul would simplify this even further by saying, "Fear and greed are symptomatic of an underlying selfish ambition." All our works will first be examined to see if we were proud or selfishly ambitious, seeking present, earthly benefits for our own delight.

One of the greatest moralists in America was Benjamin Franklin. In his autobiography he lists the nine virtues to which he wanted to dedicate himself: temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, and moderation. At the end of each day, he would examine how well he had done with each of these. He said he was doing quite well until:

a Quaker friend informed me that I was generally thought to be proud; that my pride show'd itself frequently in conversation; that I was not content with being in the right when discussing any point, but was overbearing, and rather insolent, of which he convinced me by mentioning several instances; I determined endeavoring myself, if I could, of this vice or folly among the rest, and I added Humility to my list, giving an extensive meaning to the word.

After a few months, he added this entry in his biography: "I cannot boast of much success in acquiring the reality of this virtue, but I had a good deal with regard to the appearance of it." This will not be sufficient on judgment day! Many of our good works will be burned because of our motives. How much of what we do, even the best of works, is tainted by selfish ambition!

On the other side, Paul mentions the heavenly motives—glory, honor and immortality. All three of these attributes come from a relationship with God in which a person seeks a reward in the next life. "Glory" refers to making the glory of God manifest, seeking the revelation of his character. "Honor" refers to seeking God's honor in the future rather than man's earthly honor now. And "immortality" speaks of seeking the inheritance of eternal life instead of the fleeting corruptible benefits of this life. These are the attributes which should motivate good deeds. Obviously, this requires a converted heart.

A friend named Dick recently retired and moved to this area. At our men's breakfast recently, he shared his experience with the stock market. When he and his wife were married in August, 1929, a friend loaned them \$10,000 saying that no marriage should begin without strong investments. He invested the money in the stock market on a 5-to-1 margin. Thus, he had \$50,000 of stocks to purchase. Then came October, 1929, when the stock market crashed. It took him ten years to repay his friend. He said that experience taught him how corruptible and fleeting the riches of this life are. Proverbs says, "Don't set your eyes on riches, for they will make wings for themselves and fly away." He made his motto: "Seek God and his righ-

teousness first, and all these other things shall be added unto you." This is the proper motivation for good deeds.

God first examines our motives, whether heavenly for future glory or earthly for today. These are the gates through which we walk. Then God examines our deeds, the outworking of our motivation.

Paul defines an evil deed as disobeying the truth and obeying unrighteousness. When we give ourselves to selfish ambition, the resulting deeds will violate some standard of behavior that is written in our conscience. In order to obey unrighteousness, we must rationalize and deny our conscience. Thus, in the video of our lives, we will see how we denied our conscience in doing evil deeds and how we rationalized.

In contrast, a good deed is defined as something that is done in "perseverance." The motivation for a good deed may be there, but patience and endurance are required to bring it about. To accomplish good requires much more than mere desire. It takes perseverance to remain under pressure to accomplish the thing. Good deeds are not spontaneous responses but long-term faithfulness in the midst of difficult situations.

I have been listening to some tapes on the book of Proverbs and have been convicted anew about teaching my children the Scriptures. Just last night I made a statement I have made a hundred times before: "As a family, we have to study together." This was a spontaneous response to a correct motivation. Yet I have made this same statement so often and have not endured faithfully to bring the deed about.

These are good deeds—heavenly aspirations accompanied by patience in the doing. They include things like submitting faithfully to a demanding boss or welcoming home a rebellious child when he has caused grief. It can entail forgiving a spouse who has hurt you deeply. Or it may be refusing to join in gossip when it tastes so sweet to slander others. It is giving to the Lord with liberality so that you have to plan your budget and scrimp on personal pleasure. These are good deeds. This is what God will examine—our faithfulness in these heavenly aspirations. Heavenly hope coupled with present endurance produces good deeds.

Now we can look at the destinies of these paths, our reward. One is eternal life and the other wrath and indignation. Notice how Paul defines eternal life. He says, "The one who sought glory, honor and immortality will get glory, honor, and peace." We get what we seek. He who wants glory will have the moral beauty of God inside of his life which is awesome to behold. And he will have honor—social weight and responsibility from God—because he bore the reproach of men in this life. And he will be given peace, the satisfaction and well-being which is the result of eternal life.

The other destination is wrath and indignation. In chapter 1, the apostle Paul used the term "wrath" but not "indignation." This is the Greek term which speaks of the final outburst of God's justice directed toward man for his guilt.

This produces tribulation and distress. "Tribulation" refers to pressure or weight. Now that the dam is broken, man must bear the full weight of his guilt. "Distress" speaks of anguish due to being constricted in a narrow place. Picture little Jessica McClure, who was trapped for three days at the bottom of the 14-inch wide well in Midland, Texas. This is hell—the pressure of our guilt constricting our soul.

One of the greatest American preachers, Jonathan Edwards from the 1700s, knew of this judgment. Addressing his Northampton, Conn. congregation of moral men and women who were spiritually

dead, he preached a sermon called “Sinner in the hands of an angry God.” His words so shook the congregation they fell on their knees and pleaded for mercy. This led to a revival which ultimately started the second great awakening in America. This is what he said:

The wrath of God is like great waters that are dammed for the present; they increase more and more, and rise higher and higher, till an outlet is given; and the longer the stream is stopped, the more rapid and mighty is its course, when once it is let loose. It is true, that judgment against your evil works has not been executed hitherto; but your guilt in the meantime is constantly increasing, and you are every day treasuring up more wrath...if God should only withdraw his hand from the flood-gate, it would immediately fly open, and the fiery floods of the fierceness and wrath of God would rush forth with inconceivable fury, and would come upon you with omnipotent power; and if your strength were 10,000 times greater than it is, yea, 10,000 times greater than the strength of the stoutest, sturdiest devil in hell, it would be nothing to withstand or endure it.

Your wickedness makes you as it were heavy as lead, and to tend downwards with great weight and pressure towards hell; and if God should let you go, you would immediately sink and swiftly descend and plunge into the bottomless gulf; and your healthy constitution, and your own care and prudence, and best contrivance, and all your righteousness, would have no more influence to uphold you and keep you out of hell, than a spider's web would have to stop a falling rock.

This is Paul's point. The judgment of God is according to works. And it will probe deep into our motives and examine our commitment to faithfully pursue the work. Our reward is receiving back the full measure of what we have sought.

In teaching a message like this, Paul is keenly aware of the possible objections. To make sure that he catches them, he gives us another attribute of God's judgment which strengthens the first. The judgment of God is not only according to works, it is without partiality. Verses 11-16:

**For there is no partiality with God. For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law; and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law; for not the hearers of the Law are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified. For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending themselves, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.**

Both the Old and New Testament concepts of partiality reveal that God does not “receive you on the basis of your face.” In other words, nothing external about us gives us any special standing before God. Yet all of us think that through a special relationship with God we can be exempt from this judgment according to works.

The Jews had their excuse—they were God's chosen people. Because they were the bearers of the Law, he certainly would not judge them according to their works. Paul says, “You first! Privilege does not exempt you from responsibility. Being a hearer of the Law does not justify you. Only the doer will be justified.” Leviticus 18:5 says,

“You shall therefore keep my statutes and my ordinances, by doing which a man shall live.”

Paul does not tell us yet that only Christ kept the Law, but this is the conclusion which he will draw. Doing the Law brings life. Thus, the Jew was not exempt from being judged according to his works. In fact, Amos says of the Jew, “You only have I known among all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.” Privilege heightened their responsibility.

Were the Gentiles exempt? The response of the Gentiles reminds me of my children. Whenever their behavior brings them under parental judgment, they immediately react, “I didn't know! I wasn't here!” They claim ignorance. This is what the Gentiles said: “The Law was not given to us.” Paul responds, “Even though you did not have the written Law, you had it on your hearts.” In fact, the Law can be seen in all the pagan law codes written by the nations surrounding Israel.

Paul says this fact is evidenced in two ways. First, the Gentiles occasionally keep the law. Whenever man keeps the Law, he reveals that the Law is written in his heart. This is what Peter said of Gentile Cornelius. After Cornelius received the gift of the Holy Spirit, Peter said of him, “Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”

But also on the day of judgment when God indicts man for his sins, his own conscience will bear testimony against him. Every time we sin, we have to suppress our consciences and rationalize. When Jesus reveals the secrets of our hearts, our consciences will testify as to how many times we suppressed them in order to sin.

When I graduated from college, I worked on a construction job in San Francisco. One day I had to do some repairs in the front office where the timekeeper worked. As he worked, he continued to spew out four-letter words. At one point, he turned and asked me what I was going to do when I completed the job. When I said I was going into the ministry, he immediately responded, “I only talk this way when I am at work!” He was rationalizing behavior he knew in his heart to be wrong. The judgment of God is according to our works without partiality.

I only had one goal for this message today: to cause you who are moralists to agree that you are without excuse. My hope is that, having been through this trial, you will cast them from you, for you now know that on that day they will be useless. If you maintain your life as a moralist, there is less hope for you than the overt pagan. Sheltered in your external righteousness and wallowing in complacency, you need to know that your righteousness is as “filthy rags.”

I would like to again read from Jonathan Edwards. Allow his words to penetrate your heart, and meditate upon their significance:

The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow, and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, and that of an angry God, without any promise or obligation at all, that keeps the arrow one moment from being drunk with your blood.

May God grant us the grace to see that he is impartial and to see that as moralists we stand in desperate need of the gospel of grace. Amen.

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